

Let's keep the gift of the Flint Hills alive

Dru Clark, Contributing Writer

Places we live in and grow to love need our attention, but they are indifferent and suffer at our hand like resigned prisoners of war. They show no emotion, only the scars that gross indifference and arrogance inflict. They can't bare their teeth or run away. They simply are, and exist either due to our benign neglect or the utmost care. The Flint Hills is such a place. And this is where we make our home.

In fall and winter, the hills resemble a tossed cape of cougar pelt, tawny and velvet, the dormant grasses grazed to the nub by the cattle that range here all summer. After spring burns, the burned, blackened duff is shot through with bright green, the new shoots of "tall" grass — big blue, little blue, Indian, and switch — reclaiming the nutrients and growing as tall as a saddle horn if the rains come at just the right time. Because of its relief and rocky crests, the Flint Hills "lack goodness" (as Aldo Leopold's farm did) and were passed over for plowing. This lack of goodness has kept the human population to a minimum, so dark skies prevail and the hills are superb for star watching. But as wind catchers, they are also supreme, and the corporate wind farms would like to make their dreams come true by erecting their mammoth propellers — larger than the biggest barns — on those hilltops.

A place is more than its resources. It is the backdrop for our memories, locked in the synapses that make us who we are. It has a character and a dialect all its own. It speaks to us in a way that we understand only if we have grown to love it, having lived in it and having it live in us. The beauty of its language may be understandable only to its natives or those who have chosen to make it their own. It speaks this dialect in its pastures and its creeks and its rivers, inscribed in the flint that keeps hooves neat and water pure and spirits sharp.

Wind farms may have their place, but that place should not be the Flint Hills. The place is only one of a scarce few that has unfragmented tall grass prairie. A native grouse, the greater prairie chicken, is leery of "structure," and avoids any that obstruct its view. It is one of many species that makes its home here, as we do. Those views — from any natives' perspective — are incomparable and will disappear if we are indifferent to their value as "unexploited resource."

Money will not purchase balm for our eyes or salve for the spirit: a place of beauty provides these. The Flint Hills provides. If its gifts are met with indifference, what will we have gained? The people who chose to live here showed resourcefulness in maintaining a foothold on its challenging, windswept hills. They found that if they walked too heavily on this land, it was indifferent to their mistakes. It repaid

them with incorrigible silence and gave back nothing. It is our time to confront indifference and shortsightedness and keep the gift alive.

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